

MISSIONARY RIDGE TOUR

July 21, 2023

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Partners discuss cross-boundary opportunities on Missionary Ridge.

CONTEXT

The San Juan National Forest (SJNF) is exploring options for a shaded fuel break as part of a potential categorical exclusion (CE) on Missionary Ridge. Private landowners are also doing work on their side of the fence to reduce the risk of wildfire impacting their homes and spreading throughout subdivisions. The Florida watershed, where water from Missionary Ridge flows, has been identified as a priority area by Four Rivers and the U.S. Forest Service because of the risk of a wildfire's impact to homes and because the Florida River provides critical drinking water for the City of Durango.

The SJNF intends to do a larger project in the Florida watershed in the future, but is currently busy planning for work in the Junction Creek landscape. This CE will only be the start of landscape-scale restoration and wildfire risk reduction on Missionary Ridge and the greater Florida landscape.

WHAT IS A CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION?

A CE is a class of actions planned by a federal agency like the U.S. Forest Service that does not have a significant impact on the human environment, therefore, an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not needed. CE's are smaller in scale than an EA or an EIS, typically being 3,000 acres or less.

STOP 1: PRIVATE LANDS IN THE FLORIDA WATERSHED

La Plata County has two grants for fire mitigation on private lands in the Florida watershed: the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program (COSWAP) and the Watershed Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act (WIIN). Together, these two grants will help complete work on 500 acres of private land. COSWAP has funded work in the Songbird, Timberline, Spring Creek, Ute Pass and Edgemont subdivisions, including work on common land within their HOAs and thinning along county roads. The WIIN grant has funded the installation of two automated stream monitoring sites as well as treatment on private land.

CONCERNS IN THE FLORIDA WATERSHED:

- Wildfires burning through a buildup of hazardous fuels on private lands
- Subdivisions with only one way in and one way out
- Congestion on County Road 240 in the case of evacuation
- Post-fire impacts on the Florida River
- Responder safety on Missionary Ridge

COSWAP and WIIN provide partial reimbursement for fire mitigation on private lands, but for many landowners, the price tag is still too big to do mitigation. La Plata County expressed concern that they still won't be able to accomplish the landscape-scale impact they were after with these two grants. However, the implementation of these grant funds is just the beginning and has provided a lot to learn from. Four Rivers partners discussed opportunities for more funding for projects on private lands to increase the number of acres treated in the quilt of land ownership in the Florida watershed. Encouraging private landowners to do work on their property is always a challenge, and one that Four Rivers partners are constantly trying to overcome.

STOP 2: MISSIONARY RIDGE SHADED FUEL BREAK

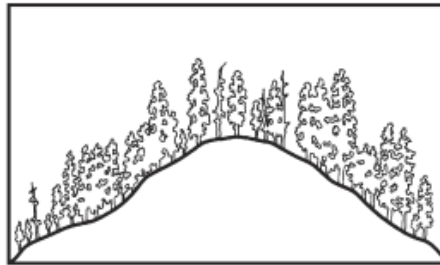
The San Juan National Forest (SJNF) is considering creating a shaded fuel break along the administrative boundary north of private land on Missionary Ridge. The shaded fuel break would be a 500 or 1,000 foot buffer off the SJNF side of the boundary to create more options for managing a wildfire that could move through this landscape. The forest in this area is overgrown after the absence of wildfire for decades, and the current conditions would make a wildfire incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to manage. The burn scar from the Missionary Ridge Fire (2002), provided a sense of comfort for a long time, but after more than 20 years, the area is becoming overgrown yet again and has a high density of snags, which creates extremely dangerous conditions for firefighters.

WHAT IS A SHADED FUEL BREAK?

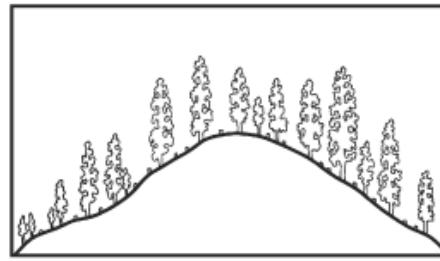
A shaded fuel break is a strip of land where the density of the forest is reduced, which creates the opportunity to use the area as a line to control wildfire. Some trees are removed, understory vegetation is reduced and ladder fuels are cleared.

A fuel break is not to be confused with a fire line, which is a strip of land that is cleared of all vegetation and is often built in response to an active wildfire.

Graphic courtesy of Frank Dennis, Colorado State University.



Above, cross section of mixed conifer stand before fuelbreak modification. Below, after modification.



The goal of this fuel break would be to reduce stand density to around 60 basal area (from 100-130 BA). The largest pines would be preserved, while diseased trees and white fir would be removed because of their intolerance to fire. Wetlands and wet meadows in the project area would be preserved and could even be enhanced through this treatment. Machinery will be used for implementation where possible, but steep slopes and roadless areas may require hand work in some places. The SJNF hopes to get this project started next Spring (2024).

Land on Missionary Ridge is managed primarily by the San Juan National Forest and private landowners, so treatment on the SJNF is only half of the work that needs to be done to protect the greater community from the risk of wildfire. The administrative Forest boundary is just that—administrative and arbitrary. There are serious concerns about the connection of fuels across the fence, and that if work isn't done on the private side, the SJNF's work won't be as impactful. It's important to remember that a shaded fuel break, or any one treatment, is not a guarantee that nearby homes will be spared from wildfire. Four Rivers has ongoing conversations about how to empower private landowners to be active managers of the forested land they own.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Work on private lands through La Plata County's grants will continue throughout the summer. Mountain Studies Institute is collecting pre- and post-treatment monitoring data to measure the impact of this work. Partners will continue searching for solutions to boost landowner engagement in wildfire mitigation programs.

The information regarding the shaded fuel break is very preliminary. The SJNF will engage experts and develop a robust plan before beginning work. Four Rivers will stay engaged in these conversations and advocate for large-scale projects on the public lands of Missionary Ridge.

Join us for our next meeting or tour by contacting Anthony Culpepper (email listed below).



The SJNF describes management options for Missionary Ridge. Photos by Alex Handloff.

Contact Anthony Culpepper, Coordinator



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